# Why Local Governments Need the American Community Survey

**Testimony of**

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## Overview

The Census long form provides key social and economic data that are used by local governments for planning and service delivery. In 2000, the long form included 34 subjects and was administered to a sample of about one-in-six households nationally. The 2010 Census plan calls for replacing the long form with the American Community Survey (ACS), which will be administered each month to a sample of the nation's population. Data will be accumulated at regular intervals, allowing for a continuous barometer of the social and economic condition of the nation's communities. According to the Census Bureau, elimination of the 2010 long form will make the decennial census less arduous operationally and enhance its capacity to collect constitutionally mandated data.

The ACS is important for New York City because it will provide more timely information for planning and for the delivery of services than the decennial census long form. Moreover, comparisons between the ACS and the decennial census in the Bronx, one of New York's five boroughs, show that the ACS was more effective in collecting vital socioeconomic information than the 2000 Census.

## Historical Context

The ACS is the latest in what has been a history of innovations related to the decennial census and, like others, born out of both necessity and foresight. In the 19th Century, as federal officials recognized the value of information on the social and economic condition of the nation's growing population, the decennial census evolved from little more than a population head count into the major source of data on the characteristics of the population. Faced with difficulties of having to tabulate this increasing volume of

information, the staff working on the census invented mechanical devices for tallying counts and ultimately recording them electronically. In the early part of the 20th century, around the time that the Census Bureau became a permanent agency of the federal government, cities like New York were growing at a prodigious rate. Health planners, journalists and the clergy, in an effort to reach out to the burgeoning communities of New York, joined with the Census Bureau to create the first neighborhood data.

In the 1930s, after the Great Depression, once again the importance of more carefully tracking the social and economic characteristics of the population became clear to the leaders of the nation. Fresh approaches to data collection that utilized the new science of sampling were incorporated into the 1940 Census. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Census Bureau was one of the first organizations in the nation to recognize the utility of computers to tabulate, compile and disseminate data. As local officials began to use these data to establish priorities for program planning and service delivery, the usefulness of maps became apparent. This gave rise to the development of computerized maps that were used by local officials to pinpoint populations in need of services at the neighborhood level – children in poverty, persons without complete plumbing, the elderly with disabilities.

The development of the ACS was born out of necessity. Two decades ago, local entities such as New York challenged the Census Bureau to provide portraits of neighborhoods more than once a decade. The decennial portrait was proving to be increasingly inadequate in providing information on the country's mobile population, both urban and rural. However, it wasn't until 1991, when consternation over the lackluster results of the 1990 Census caused several in Congress to press the Census Bureau to "find a better way," that the idea of the ACS was pursued in earnest. With the support of the Congress, the Census Bureau has now been pilot-testing the ACS for

more than eight years and brought the survey to a point where national implementation is ready to occur.

So, what is it about the ACS that should make it a priority in this era of budget austerity? There are two main reasons: first, as a source of useful social and economic small-area data, the decennial census likely reached the limits of its capability in 2000; and second, cost-effective government requires information that is current.

**The Decennial Census Reached its Limit in 2000**

For the past six years, we in New York City have partnered with the Census Bureau in evaluating the American Community Survey, first in Rockland County, a suburb of New York City. Then, in 1999, Bronx County was added to the list of ACS test areas. Most recently, we were able to evaluate the quality of socioeconomic data from the ACS against similar data from the 2000 decennial census. Here is what we found:

The 2000 Census did a great job counting Bronx residents, many of whom were in historically undercounted groups in neighborhoods that were among the poorest in the nation. To meet its constitutional mandate, the census focuses, first and foremost, on a count of people and their basic characteristics, such as sex, race and age. Our population count of just over 8 million was the largest enumerated population in New York City's history, with Bronx County recording a population of more than 1.3 million, an increase of 129,000 persons or 11 percent since 1990.

Measuring social and economic characteristics, however, was quite another matter. The census long form fell on hard times in the Bronx in 2000. It appears that many of the hardest-to-enumerate households returned forms with much information missing or, even worse, literally no answers to the long form questions, such as those on

education, language, birthplace and income. More than one of every five census long forms in the Bronx had to be dropped from the pool of questionnaires used to create estimates because they failed to achieve a threshold designating them as minimally complete. The fact that a majority of these questionnaires had little or no information on them usually means that the Census enumerators failed to make direct contact with members of the household and were forced to use proxy respondents, such as neighbors, as a way to gather basic information.

The mammoth job that is the census, with thousands of temporary employees, seemed to have reached the limits of its effectiveness in the Bronx. In other words, the Census did an outstanding job of **counting** Bronx residents in 2000, but did a relatively poor job collecting information on their social and economic **characteristics**.

The ACS is a better vehicle than the census for collecting data on the characteristics of the population because the survey's methodology allows for the use of trained, professional interviewers, who have many years of experience collecting data from reluctant respondents. Further, unlike the Census, the ACS is done gradually, on a continuous basis, year after year, where the focus is on obtaining a complete portrait of social and economic characteristics. This incremental approach results in a methodical and consistent collection of data items in the operation known as nonresponse follow-up, where ACS interviewers visit a sample of households that failed to return their questionnaires by mail or respond by telephone. Our research in the Bronx shows that follow-up enumerators in the 2000 ACS were far more successful in obtaining critical information on birthplace, occupation and income than in the 2000 Census. We have found that the ACS had a higher level of completed questionnaires and lower levels of missing data on key social and economic items, yielding fewer situations where the Census Bureau must employ a procedure that "imputes" part or all of a household's characteristics because no data were collected.

**The Need for Current Information**

As the data hub for New York City agencies, my staff and I provide data for countless applications relating to the work of city agencies and other organizations doing business with the city. The post-September 11, 2001 effort to rebuild lower Manhattan, including major residential construction and the creation of major transportation infrastructure, and New York's mission to effectively deliver services with limited resources are two cases in point.

Rebuilding Lower Manhattan

Census data give us a view of New York's neighborhoods in 2000. We know a great deal about persons who resided in lower Manhattan in April of 2000 and about the huge flows of workers into and out of that area as of that date. The tragedy of September 11, 2001 brought devastation to many families in New York City. In addition, because of the dramatic effects of that day, a collateral result was that the usefulness of census data for lower Manhattan was seriously compromised. Without an alternative to the traditional census long form, we will have to wait until 2012 for a post 9/11 view of the city because there is no way at present to gauge change over shorter periods of time. This is clearly untenable, in light of the huge expenditure of resources that the rebuilding effort entails.

As part of the plans for lower Manhattan, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has emphasized the importance of new residential development. Such planning requires data on the current population of the area; it is no longer possible to use the 2000 data as if it were "current," given the events of September 11, 2001. Accurate knowledge of the characteristics of people who live in lower Manhattan neighborhoods helps planners

make decisions on the kinds of development that are suitable for future residents, for example, the type of housing and the need for new schools. Data on average household size, households by type, presence of children and a variety of socioeconomic characteristics all help to define the existing conditions and, by extension, future needs. The 2000 Census data are now obsolete for this purpose, given the population movements and changes to the area associated with the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

Similarly, a current picture of the labor force in lower Manhattan, specifically data on the occupation, industry and commuting patterns of workers, is essential in evaluating the need for transportation infrastructure. The displacement of jobs and residential population after September 11, 2001 has altered the character of work flows, and we have no means to update the picture. The 2010 decennial census data for journey-to-work will not be out until 2013. A current picture can only be gleaned from the New York State Department of Labor information on jobs, which is a very limited data source that contains no information on commuting patterns. Further, other survey data on transportation flows cannot provide detailed information on the commuting of workers at the sub-county level.

The Planning and Delivery of Services

The planning and delivery of services in New York City occur largely within the context of 59 geographic units known as Community Districts. Created in the late 1960s, these districts are aggregates of neighborhoods represented by Community Boards, with members whose job it is to make officials within city government aware of the changing needs of the communities they serve, from day care for working mothers, to transportation for the elderly, to the resurfacing of streets. My staff and I create extensive data profiles after each census that become the context for decisions at the

district level regarding unmet needs for the elderly, dollars for programs to encourage young people to pursue recreational and educational activities, and for changes in zoning and land use regulations to encourage specific types of residential development. Concerning residential development, Mayor Bloomberg is committed to increasing the stock of available housing through providing financial incentives that strengthen the private marketplace. Over the next two years, my Department will be working with New York City's Department of Housing, Preservation and Development to allocate resources to these efforts. We will be using data from the Bronx ACS as part of our analysis, specifically as an update to the information provided in the 2000 Census for the borough's households.

In New York City, we use data to make decisions that involve large expenditures of resources to serve the needs of our population, using Community Districts as a base for identification of needs and the delivery of services. But, profiles of our residents and their needs are quickly based on old data. If the ACS is allowed to go forward, we will not have to wait ten years for an updated statistical portrait of our Community Districts. The ACS will provide us with data every year for all of our 59 districts.

Targeting language services for local officials who are trying to prioritize areas for English language proficiency programs, identifying areas around city hospitals with large numbers of recent immigrants as a way of anticipating the need for interpreters in emergency rooms, guiding the allocation of dollars for youth recreation programs to foster productive behavior, and helping to prioritize the construction of subway amenities to serve the elderly are just a few examples of how census data are used for planning and service delivery. The allocation of these resources requires a current picture of the population and this need is universal, encompassing all local governments – urban and rural.

The best example, though, concerns identifying and addressing the needs of a community's poorest residents, with programs for education and job training. The 2000 Census indicated that one-in-five New York City residents were below the poverty line, more than 1.67 million persons. Over one-third of city residents below the poverty line were under the age of 18, some 572,000 persons. Further, although poverty rates continued to be high among female-headed families with children, the data indicate that significant increases in poverty were apparent among working class married-couple families. These are families that are economically marginal, where small changes in the economic cycle can put them below the poverty line.

Addressing the needs of the population below poverty is a critical mission for all local governments. When recession strikes, as it did at the start of 2001, local governments are severely constrained because the data no longer track where the most needy people live. (The same was true after the 1990 Census, when the recession struck the Northeast and the Midwest in 1991.) Because changes in the economy affect groups differently, it is important to be able to identify local communities that have been adversely affected by an economic downturn, something we cannot do right now. Without an idea about the current distribution of poor persons, it becomes virtually impossible for local agencies to intercede effectively to buffer the impacts of an economic slowdown through investments in programs aimed at enhancing job skills, such as education and job training.

**Summary**

Every day, my office receives requests from local agencies and community service providers who look to us for data in support of programs to meet the needs of a large and diverse population. Examples include a local nonprofit community redevelopment

organization applying for housing funds; an environmental assessment agency seeking to evaluate the impact of waste transfer stations on the local population; planners seeking to convert former industrial sites into areas for future residential construction; transportation planners working with the private sector on ways to expand ferry service for commuters across the East River and the Hudson. The information we provide helps them make decisions that frequently involve a large commitment of resources.

Having people come to you for this purpose is both an honor and a challenging responsibility. We constantly try to find ways to "get it right," because that is what makes government at the local level effective. However, we cannot get it right unless we have good data to inform our perspective. Ill-informed decisions result in wasteful spending, something no government in this nation can afford.

It is important that the Congress support activities that are cost-effective for local government decision-making so we can make the most of our resources. What we do not have in dollars, we must at least partly make up for with wise decisions. Therefore, we in New York City would like to urge the Congress to continue its commitment to innovation by strongly supporting the national implementation of the ACS, so that it can be incorporated as a replacement for the census long form in 2010. Time is now of the essence, since 2010 Census planning hinges on implementation of the ACS. We urge the Congress to act in a timely and decisive way.

Thank you and I would be glad to take any questions.